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(54) **MULTIPLE BEAM LASER WELDING APPARATUS**

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(30) **Foreign Application Priority Data**

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(52) **U.S. Cl.** **219/121.63; 219/121.64; 219/121.77; 219/121.83**

(58) **Field of Search** **219/121.63, 121.64, 219/121.83, 121.77, 121.8**

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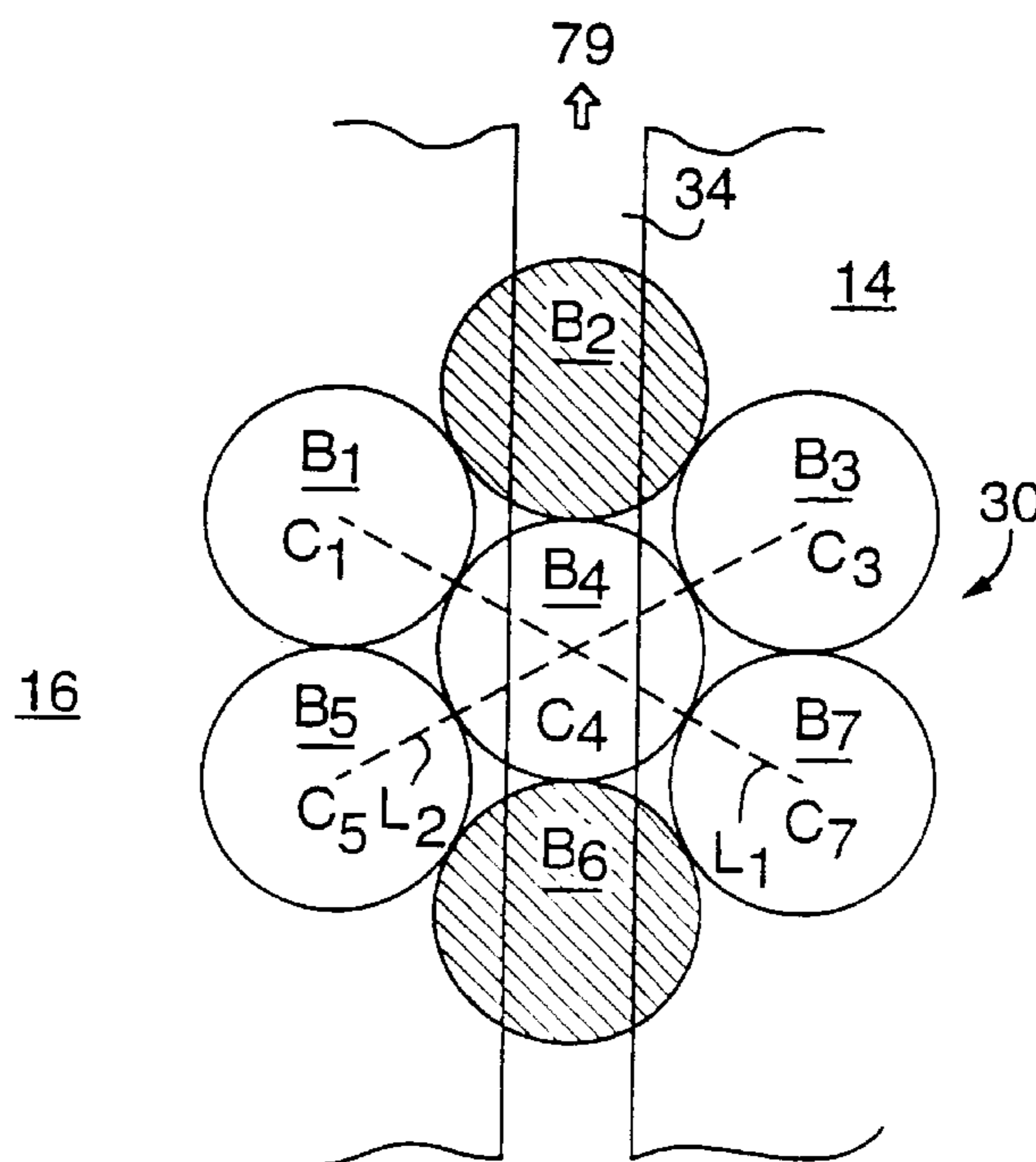
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(57) **ABSTRACT**

A laser welding apparatus for use in industrial processing, which is operable to emit laser energy to weld blanks and the like together along a seamline. The emitted laser energy comprises a multiple beam of two or more coherent light sources. The apparatus is adapted to selectively reposition the orientation of the multiple beam relative to the seamline to compensate for gaps between the abutting portions of the workpieces to be joined.

18 Claims, 6 Drawing Sheets



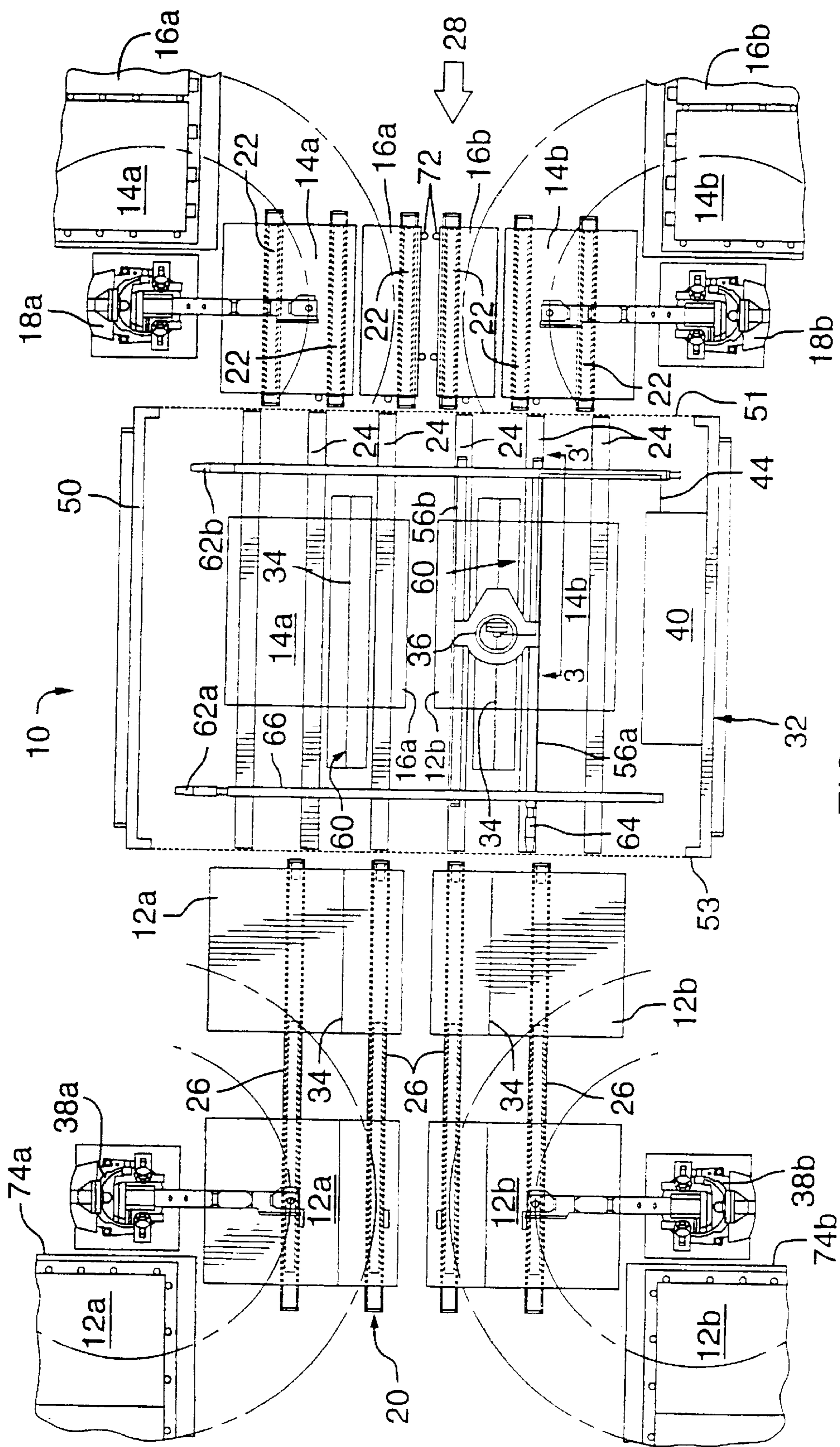


FIG. 1

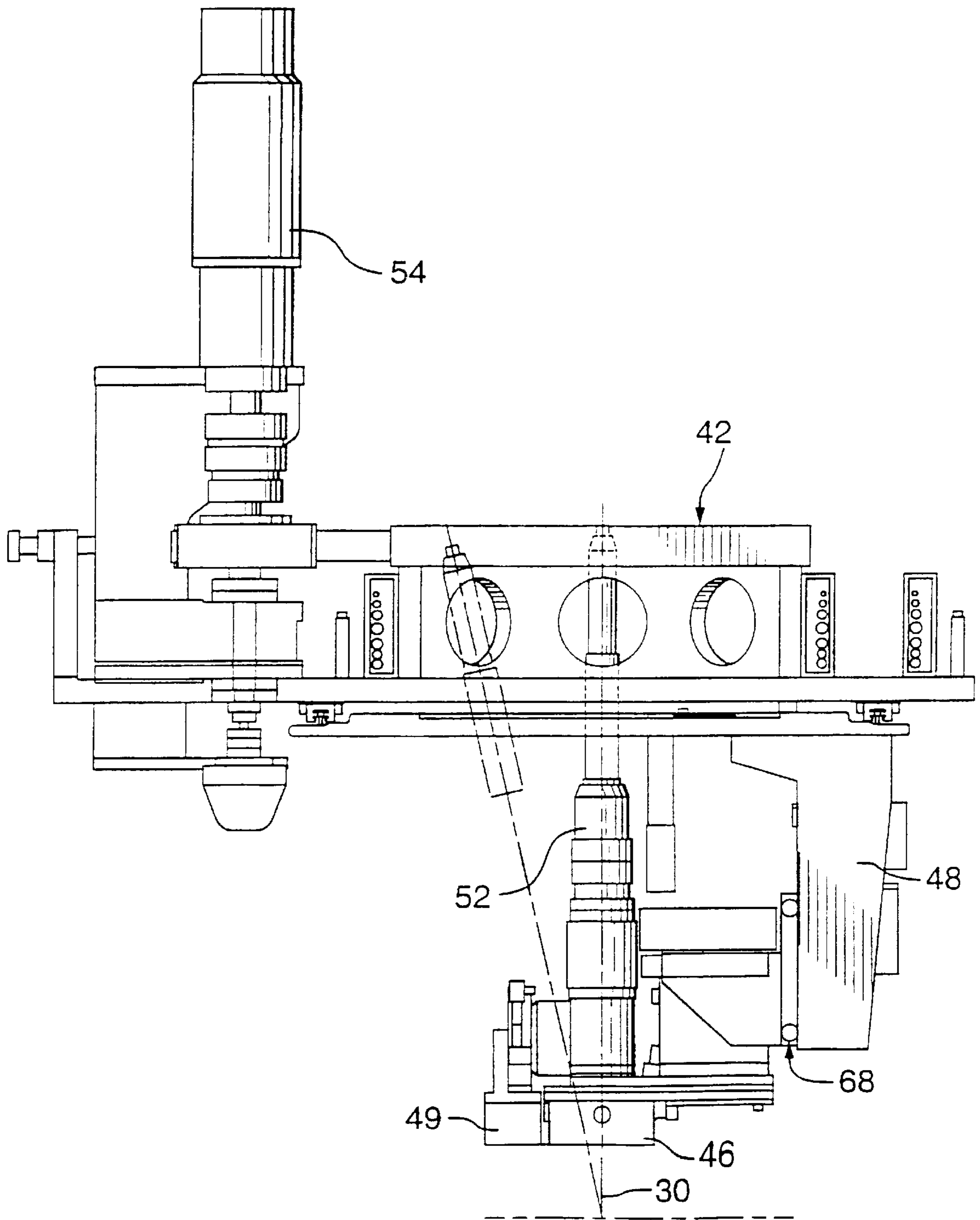


FIG.2

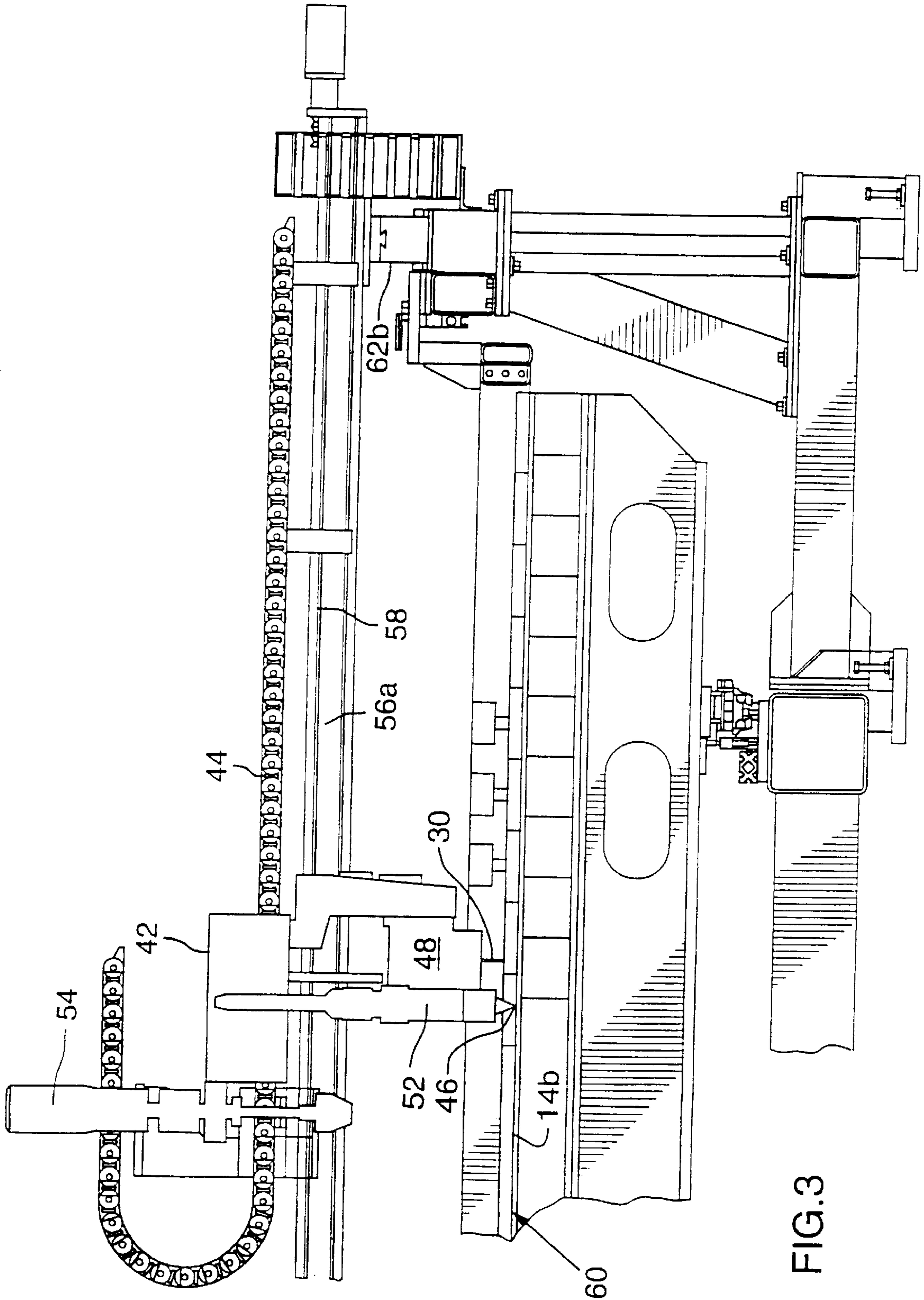


FIG.3

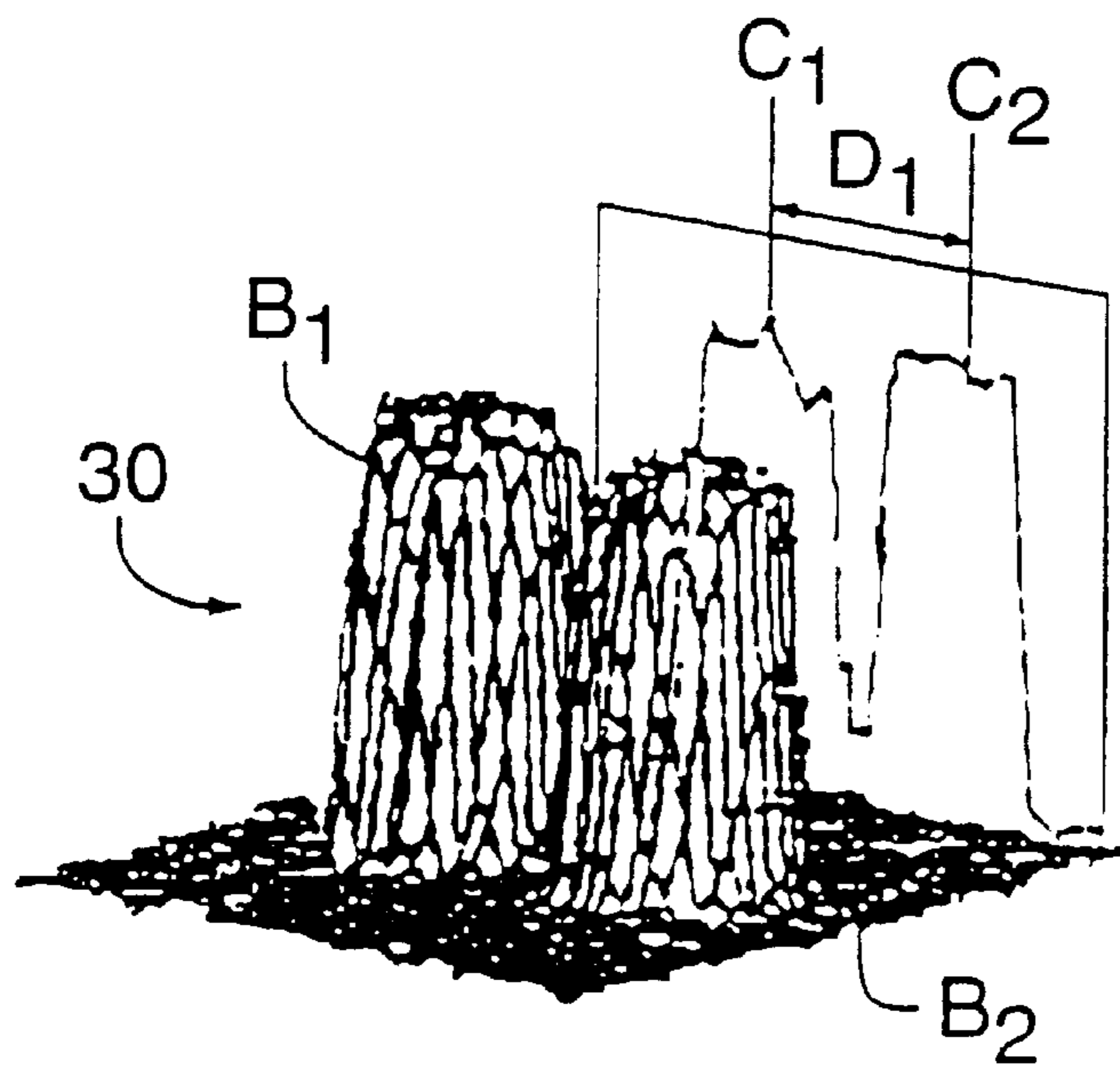


FIG. 4

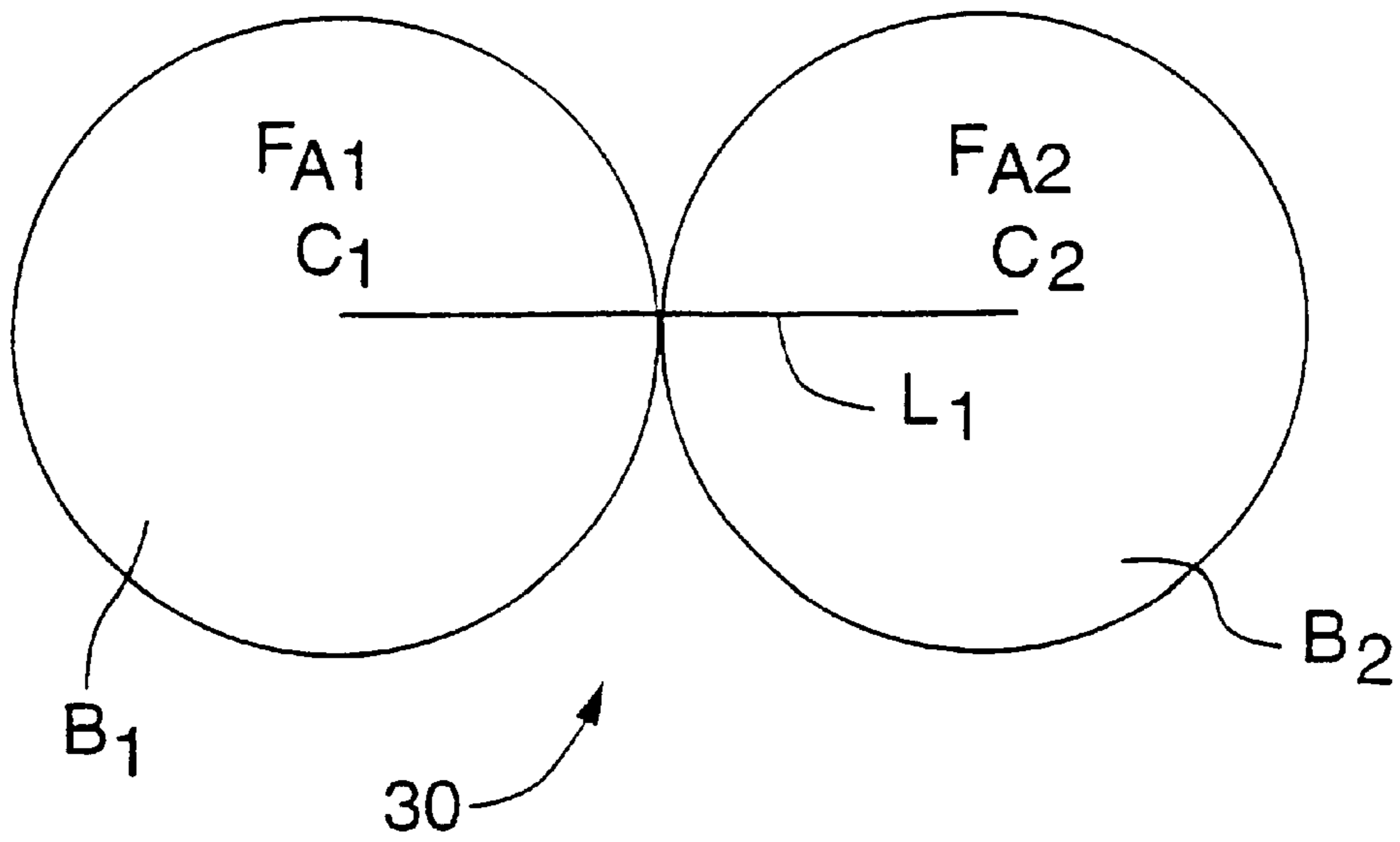


FIG. 5

FIG.6

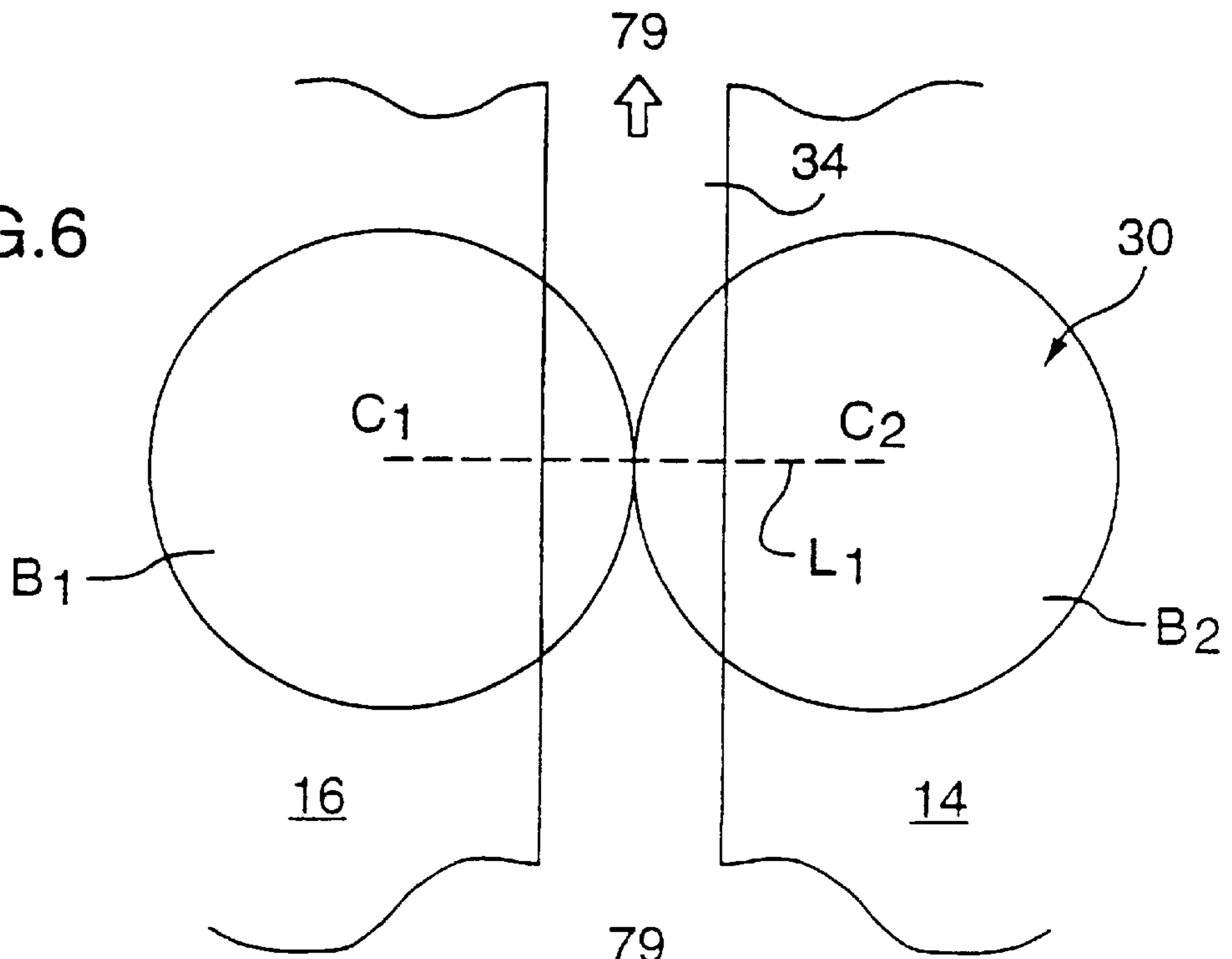
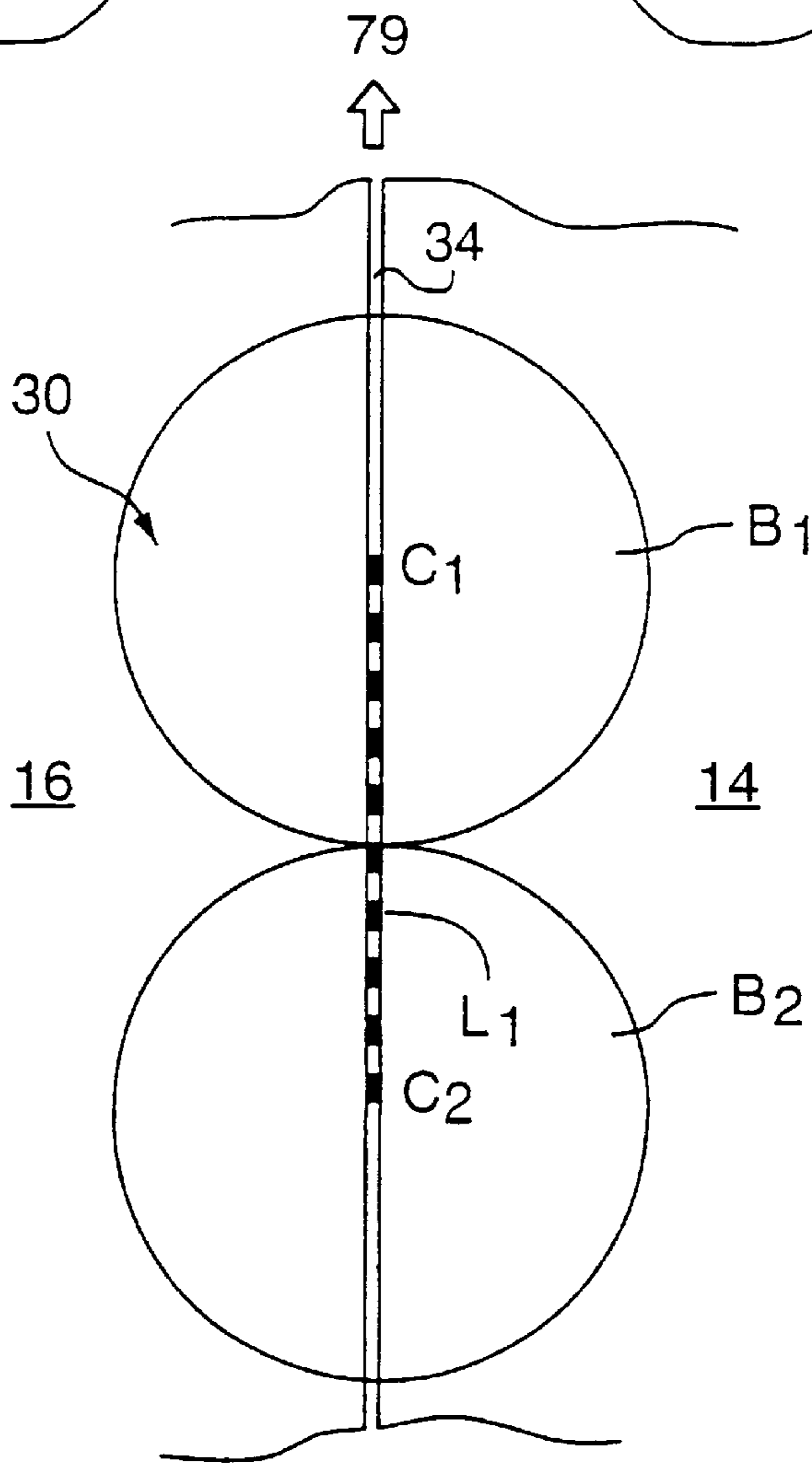
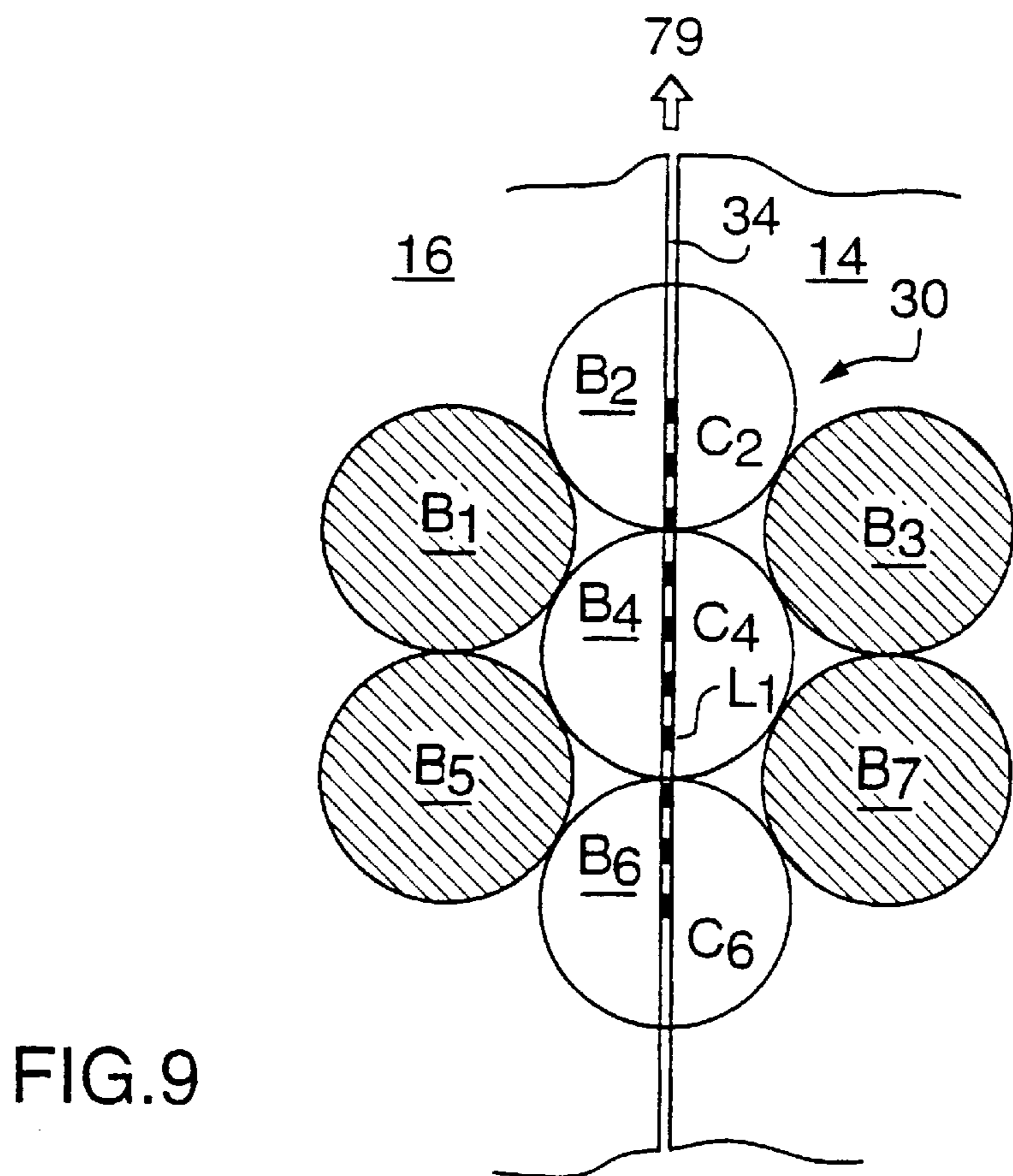
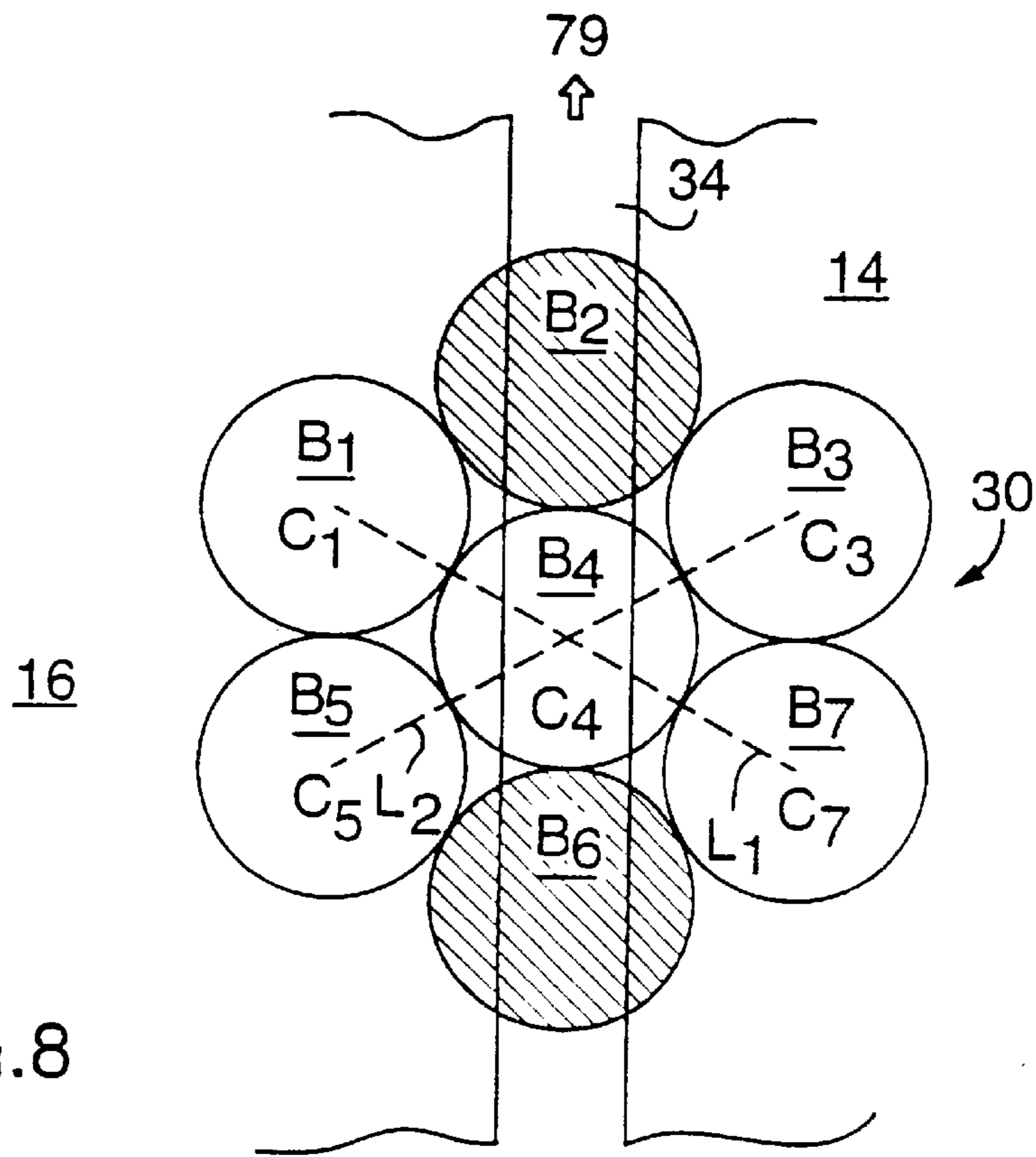


FIG.7





MULTIPLE BEAM LASER WELDING APPARATUS

RELATED APPLICATIONS

This application is a continuation of the applicant's prior U.S. patent application Ser. No. 09/308,287, which entered the United States national phase on May 12, 1999 now U.S. Pat. No. 6,211,483, as the national stage of International application No. PCT/CA98/00153, filed Feb. 24, 1998.

SCOPE OF THE INVENTION

The present invention relates to a method and an apparatus for laser welding together two or more sheet blanks along a seamline, and more particularly, to an apparatus which adjusts the focal intensity of the laser beam energy on the seamline and/or weld time to compensate for variations in the spacing between the edges of the blanks to be joined.

BACKGROUND OF THE INVENTION

Present day manufacturing requirements often necessitate the formation of various workpiece components by welding together two or more sheet metal blanks. More frequently, lasers have been used to weld abutting edge portions of the sheet blanks along seamlines in the formation of workpiece components.

Conventional laser welding apparatus have suffered the disadvantage in that heretofore, the use of lasers to weld the blanks together has necessitated that the edges of the sheet blanks be pre-finished and have a mirror-smooth finish. The requirements of blank edge preparations have to a large extent been responsible for the reluctance by industries to adapt the use of laser welding apparatus in continuous seam welding processes used to form sheet blanks.

Conventional laser apparatus have suffered the further disadvantage in that to ensure the formation of a complete weld and prevent butt-weld seams having concavity, it is necessary to ensure precise abutting contact between the proximal edges of the sheet metal blanks along the entire length of the weld seam. The necessity of maintaining the sheet blanks in precise contact during welding disadvantageously results in an increase in workpiece production time as a result of the necessity of ensuring the blanks are in an exact abutting position prior to welding.

SUMMARY OF THE INVENTION

The inventor has appreciated an improved apparatus for butt welding together sheet metal blanks which incorporates a yttrium aluminum garnet (YAG) laser, and has disclosed the operation of such an apparatus in pending Canadian patent application Serial No. 2,167,111, which was filed Jan. 15, 1996. The use of a YAG laser to butt weld together sheet blanks advantageously has been found to produce weld seams without a concave weld profile, where gaps of up to 0.1 mm exist between the sheet blanks.

The applicant has, however, appreciated that providing an apparatus which may effectively butt weld sheet blanks which are separated by larger gaps, would facilitate workpiece production by requiring less stringent positioning and edge finishing of the sheet blanks prior to welding. This, in turn, would increase production time and reduce sheet blank manufacturing cost.

To at least partially overcome the disadvantages of the prior art, the present invention provides a welding apparatus for use in industrial processing, which is operable to emit an energy beam or ion beam (hereinafter collectively referred

to as an energy beam), to weld blanks and the like together along a seam line. The energy beam used to weld the blanks preferably consists of a multiple beam of two or more coherent light sources. The apparatus includes a mechanism to selectively reposition the orientation of the multiple beam relative to the seamline.

Another object of the invention is to provide an apparatus for butt welding together proximal edge portions of two or more sheet blanks which are separated by a gap of up to 0.25 mm or more.

Another object of the invention is to provide an apparatus for laser welding together two or more sheet blanks, without requiring the edge portions of the blanks to be pre-finished.

A further object of the invention is to provide an apparatus for joining together workpiece blanks to form a composite workpiece, and which does not require precise alignment and positioning of the blanks prior to joining.

Another object of the invention is to provide an apparatus for welding together proximal edge portions of sheet blanks having different relative thicknesses.

A further object of the invention is to provide an apparatus for laser butt welding together two or more sheet blanks along a seamline, and which automatically senses the spacing between proximal edge portions of the sheet blanks and compensates either the speed and/or positioning and/or power of the laser energy to ensure the formation of an effective weld seam across the proximal portions.

Another object of the invention is to provide a laser welding apparatus adapted to weld proximal edge portions of sheet metal blanks along either straight, non-linear or curved weld seams.

To achieve at least some of the foregoing objects, the present invention includes a welding apparatus for welding together proximal edge portions of two or more sheet blanks. The welding apparatus is configured to emit a multiple or composite energy beam which consists of two, three or more energy beams. Preferably, the energy beams are laser beams or coherent light sources used to weld the sheet blanks together along a seamline, however, the use of the invention with other energy beams such as ion or electron beams and the like is also possible and will operate in a like manner.

The coherent light sources or laser beams which make up the composite beam are focused towards a portion of the blanks to be welded together at respective focal area or focal spot. The focal areas of each of the laser beams have an optic centre, wherein the optic centres of at least two of the laser beams (i.e. a first laser beam and a second laser beam) which make up the composite beam are spaced or offset from each other.

The spaced optic centres of the first and second laser beams provide the composite beam with a beam energy or intensity profile which is elongated in the orientation of the optic centres. The optic centres of the laser beam may thus be said to each define one end of a focal line of elongation of the composite beam.

The composite beam of laser energy is emitted from a laser head which is movable over the workpiece blanks. The apparatus further includes mechanisms to vary the intensity per unit area of the composite beam. For example, the laser head is preferably rotatably mounted to move the focal line of the composite beam relative to the proximal edge portions of the blanks to be welded. The beam may be moved between a position wherein the focal line is positioned substantially normal to the proximal edge portions of the blanks and a position wherein the focal line is oriented in a

position substantially aligned with the proximal edge portions of the workpieces which are to be welded.

Other suitable mechanisms to alter the beam intensity per unit area also would include a drive mechanism used to vary the speed at which the laser head moves over the seamline, or a power regulator used to vary the output power of the laser beams.

The coherent light sources making up the composite beam may, for example, comprise almost any type of laser beam, including CO₂ lasers. More preferably, however, high energy lasers, such as yttrium aluminum garnet (YAG) lasers are used to weld the blanks.

The laser head is preferably movably provided in the apparatus to move the composite beam relative to the sheet blanks along a predetermined or sensed linear and/or curved path. The laser may thus be activated and the laser head moved along its sensed/predetermined path to weld proximal edges of the sheet blanks together along a seamline.

More preferably, the apparatus includes a sensing mechanism for sensing the spacing between abutting edge portions of the blanks to be welded. A microprocessor control is provided to rotate the laser head or fiber optic connectors relative to the seamline in response to the sensed spacing. In this manner, the composite beam may be selectively rotated to move the focal line. The focal line may be rotated to a preset orientation relative to the portion of the seamline which is to be formed, as for example, in an orientation at or between a position normal to the abutting edge portions of the blanks and a position substantially aligned thereover.

Where a gap exists between the abutting edge portions of the blanks which are to be joined, the composite beam is positioned so that the optic centres of the first and second laser beams are each located on a respective edge portion of each blank, with the focal line of the composite beam straddling the gap. This position provides a maximum spread of laser energy across the gap producing the maximum infill of molten metal into the gap from the edge portions of the blanks.

Where no gap exists between the abutting edge portions of the blanks, the laser head may be rotated so that the composite beam is positioned with its focal line moved towards or into alignment with the seamline. In this position, the laser energy is focused along the seamline which is to be formed. This advantageously concentrates the intensity of the laser energy along the seamline and decreases the time required to form a complete weld seam, enabling a finished blank to be produced with higher weld speeds.

More preferably, the speed of movement of the laser head above the blank is controlled having regard to the degree of spacing between the proximate portions of the blanks and/or the orientation of the focal line of the composite beam relative to the seamline which is to be formed. As indicated, if desired, the power output of the energy beam could also be varied with any sensed spacing between the abutting edge portions of the blanks. In this manner, higher energy outputs may be provided when the focal line of the beam energy straddles any gap and lower beam energy used when the focal line is aligned with the weld seam.

Accordingly, in one aspect, the present invention resides in an apparatus for joining together proximal edge portions of two workpiece blanks along a seamline comprising,

laser means for emitting a composite beam to weld said blanks together along said seamline,

said composite beam including a first laser beam and a second laser beam, each of said first and second laser beams

being focused towards a portion of said blanks to be welded at respective focal areas having an optic centre, wherein the optic centres of said first and second laser beams are offset from each other and each define one end of a focal line of said composite beam,

rotation means for selectively rotating said laser means to move said focal line relative to said portion of said blanks between a position wherein said focal line is oriented substantially normal to said portion of said seamline, and a position wherein said focal line is oriented substantially aligned with said portion of said seamline.

In another aspect, the present invention resides in a laser apparatus for welding together abutting edge portions of two sheet blanks along a seamline, the apparatus comprising:

a laser head operable to emit laser energy to weld said blanks together along the seamline,

rotation means for rotating the laser head and change the orientation of said laser energy relative said seamline,

wherein said laser energy comprises a multiple beam of at least two offset laser beams.

In a further aspect, the present invention resides in a method as claimed in claim 15, wherein said apparatus further includes sensing means for sensing spacing between the abutting portions of the blanks, and

wherein said method includes the further step of sensing the spacing between the adjacent portions of the blanks at said portion of said blanks to be welded prior to moving said focal line therealong, and

wherein said preset position of said focal line is determined by the sensed spacing between the adjacent portions of the blanks.

In another aspect, the present invention resides in an apparatus for joining together proximal edge portions of two workpiece blanks along a seamline comprising,

means for emitting a composite energy beam to weld said blanks together along said seamline,

said composite energy beam including a first energy beam and a second energy beam, each of said first and second energy beams being focused towards a portion of said blanks to be welded at respective focal areas having a centre, wherein the centres of said first and second laser beams are offset from each other and each define one end of a focal line of said composite energy beam,

sensor means for sensing any spacing between the proximal edge portions of the blanks, and means for changing the beam intensity per unit area selected from the group consisting of,

rotation means for selectively rotating said means for emitting said composite energy beam to move said focal line relative to said portion of said blanks between a position wherein said focal line is oriented substantially normal to said portion of said seamline, and a position wherein said focal line is oriented substantially aligned with said portion of said seamline,

drive means for moving said means for emitting said composite energy beam along said seamline, said drive means activatable to vary the speed of movement of said laser beam depending on the sensed spacing between the proximal edge portions of the blanks, and

power regulating means to vary the composite energy beam energy output depending on the sensed spacing between the proximal edge portions of the blanks.

BRIEF DESCRIPTION OF THE DRAWINGS

Further objects and advantages of the invention will appear from the following description, taken together with the accompanying drawings in which:

FIG. 1 shows a schematic top view of a production assembly line for forming composite workpieces in accordance with the present invention;

FIG. 2 shows a schematic side view of a laser welding head used in the production assembly line of FIG. 1;

FIG. 3 shows the laser welding apparatus shown in the production assembly line of FIG. 1, taken along lines 3-3' showing the use of a laser to weld sheet blanks;

FIG. 4 shows graphically an intensity profile of a composite laser beam in accordance with a first embodiment of the invention;

FIG. 5 shows schematically a plan view of the laser beam focal areas of the composite laser beam profile shown in FIG. 4;

FIG. 6 shows a plan view of the laser beam focal areas of the composite laser beam shown in FIG. 4, wherein the composite beam is oriented with its focal line positioned normal to the abutting portions of the blanks to be welded;

FIG. 7 shows a plan view of the laser beam focal areas of the composite laser beam shown in FIG. 4, wherein the composite beam is oriented with its focal line positioned in alignment with the abutting portions of the blanks to be welded; and

FIGS. 8 and 9 show schematically the laser beam focal areas of a coherent light source bundle for use with the laser of FIG. 1, in accordance with a further embodiment of the invention.

DETAILED DESCRIPTION OF THE INVENTION

Reference is made to FIG. 1 which shows a production assembly line 10 used in the simultaneous manufacture of two composite workpieces 12a, 12b. With the assembly line 10 shown, robot vacuum lifts 18a, 18b are used to move pairs of sheet metal blanks 14a, 16a, 14b, 16b from respective supply stacks. Each robot 18a, 18b is adapted to move the paired blanks 14a, 16a, 14b, 16b, respectively onto a conveyor array 20 used to convey the blanks 14a, 16a, 14b, 16b and finished workpieces 12a, 12b along the assembly line 10. The conveyor array 20 consists of three sets of elongated magnet stepping conveyors 22, 24, 26 which are operable to move the pairs of blanks 14a, 16a and 14b, 16b and workpieces 12a, 12b in the longitudinal direction of arrow 28. The magnetic stepping conveyors which comprise each conveyor set 22, 24, 26 are shown in FIG. 1 arranged in a parallel orientation to both each other and the conveyors in the remaining sets. It is to be appreciated that other conveyor configurations are also possible.

As will be described hereafter, the first set of conveyors 22 are used in the initial positioning of the blanks 14a, 16a and 14b, 16b in the production line 10, and the conveyance of the positioned blanks 14a, 16a and 14b, 16b on to the second set of conveyors 24.

The conveyors 24 are provided as part of a laser welding station 32 in which the proximal edge portions of the blanks 14a, 16a and 14b, 16b are welded together along a seamline by a yttrium aluminum garnet (YAG) laser 36. The conveyors 24 thus are used to move the unwelded blanks 14a, 16a and 14b, 16b to a welding position, and then convey the completed workpiece 12a, 12b onto the third set of conveyors 26.

The third set of conveyors 26 are used to convey the completed composite workpieces 12a, 12b to robotic vacuum lifts 38a, 38b which lift the workpieces 12a, 12b therefrom and onto output stacks.

The production line 10 shown in FIG. 1 is configured for the concurrent manufacture of two completed workpieces 12a, 12b by a single laser 36. As shown best in FIGS. 1 to 3, the YAG laser 36 includes a coherent light source generator 40 used to generate two coherent light sources or laser beams, a movable laser head assembly 42 (FIG. 2) and a fibre optic coupling 44 (FIGS. 1 and 3) optically connecting the generator 40 and laser head assembly 42. The fibre optic coupling 44 consists of a bundle of two fibre optic cables (not shown). The energy of the two coherent light sources generated in the generator 40 thus travels via a respective fibre optic cable to the laser head assembly.

FIG. 2 shows best the laser head assembly 42 includes a light emitting laser head 46 from which laser energy is emitted. As disclosed, the laser energy comprises the composite beam which consists of the two coherent light sources. The assembly 42 further includes a support 48 which rotatably mounts the laser head 46, and a drive motor 52 used to rotate the laser head 46 on the support 48. The laser head assembly 42 may be preprogrammed in movement, but is preferably provided with a microprocessor controlled seam-tracking sensor 49 (FIG. 2). The sensor 49 senses the spacing between the proximal edge portions of each pair of sheet blanks 14a, 16a, 14b, 16b to be joined. The sensor 49 may, for example, include a separate coherent light source which directs a beam of coherent light downwardly onto the proximal portions of the sheet blanks and a vision or optic sensor for sensing light reflected therefrom. By the absence of reflected light, the vision or optic sensor 49 may thus be used to provide data indicative of the spacing between the abutting edge portions of the sheet blanks. More preferably, the sensor 49 is used to track the seamline 34 and provides control signals to the drive motors 52 and 64 and the gantry robot 54 to automatically position the laser head 42 so that the composite beam 30 is directed at the weld seam.

FIG. 1 shows best the laser 36 as being entirely housed within an enclosure 50. The enclosure 50 is provided with mailbox type entry and exit doors 51, 53. The entry and exit doors 51, 53 are opened to permit movement of the blanks 14a, 16a, 14b, 16b and workpieces 12a, 12b into and out of the enclosure 50. The entry and exit doors 51, 53 are closed during welding operations to optically isolate the laser 36 and contain any potentially eye damaging YAG laser energy.

Clamping units 60 are provided within the enclosure 50 for maintaining the sheet blanks 14a, 16a and 14b, 16b in fixed abutting position during welding operations. While numerous types of clamping arrangements are possible, the clamping units 60 preferably each consist of a magnetic clamping unit of the type disclosed in the applicant's Canadian patent application serial No. 2,167,111, laid open Jul. 12, 1997.

The entire laser head assembly 42 is configured for two axis movement horizontally. The assembly 42 is movable in a first horizontal direction over the conveyors 24 and blanks 14a, 16a, 14b, 16b via a gantry robot 54, along a paired overhead support and slave support 56a, 56b. The laser head assembly 42 moves in the first direction via the gantry robot 54, along a track 58 (FIG. 3) provided on the overhead support 56a. Each of the pairs of supports 56a, 56b are further slidable in a second horizontal direction which is perpendicular to the first on parallel spaced end supports 62a, 62b.

Each of the end supports 62a, 62b in turn movably support the ends of the parallel supports 56a, 56b. A servo drive motor 64 (FIG. 1) is provided at the end of support 56a and

engages a track **66** which extends along one end of support **62a**. The movement of the laser head assembly **42** along the supports **56a,56b**, and the movement of the supports **56a,56b** on the end supports **62a,62b** permits the laser head **46** to move over the blanks **14a,16a, 14b,16b** in any horizontal direction. In addition, it is preferable that the laser head **42** be vertically movable, as for example, by a rack and pinion lift drive mechanism or pneumatic slide **68** (FIG. 2), thereby permitting movement of the laser head **42** along all three axis to provide increased adaptability to the assembly line **10**. It is to be appreciated that with this construction, the laser **36** may be used to not only join together workpieces **14a,16a, 14b,16b** along preprogrammed linear weld seams, but also along curved weld seams for a variety of different workpieces, without extensive pre-setup and pre-positioning of the sheet blanks.

During welding operations, two coherent light sources are produced in the coherent light source generator **40**. The coherent light sources travel via a respective fibre optic cable in the coupling **44** to the laser head **42** and are emitted therefrom towards the portion of the seamline **34** to be laser welded. Two laser beams are thus emitted from the laser head **42** to weld proximal edges of the blanks **14a,16a** and **14b,16b** as a composite laser beam **30**.

FIG. 4 shows graphically the energy profile of the composite beam **30** made up of the two substantially non-overlapping laser beams B_1, B_2 . FIG. 5 shows best the divergence or focal area F_{A1}, F_{A2} of the two laser beams B_1, B_2 at the surface of the workpieces **14,16** to be joined. Each of the laser beams has an optic centre C_1 and C_2 , respectively, and a divergence radius at the workpieces selected at between about 0.2 mm and 1 mm, and more preferably, about 0.6 mm. The optic centres C_1, C_2 are offset from each other by a distance D_1 (FIG. 4) of between about 0.1 mm to 3.0 mm, and more preferably about 1.2 mm. The optic centres C_1, C_2 each define one end of a focal line L_1 (FIG. 5) of the composite laser beam **30** which extends in the direction along which the energy spread of the laser beam **30** is elongated.

In operation of the assembly line **10**, pairs of component sheets **14a,16a** and **14b,16b** are moved sequentially via the robotic vacuum lifts **18a,18b** from respective supply stacks. The pairs of blanks **14a,16a** and **14b,16b** are positioned on the parallel magnetic feed conveyors **22**. The robotic vacuum lifts **18a,18b** are used to move each component sheets **14a,16a, 14b,16b**, respectively, through an initial qualifying procedure. The qualifying procedure ensures correct positioning of the sheets on the feed conveyors **22**, and involves sliding the sheet blanks **14,16** against sets of retractable locating pins **72** (FIG. 1) to ensure the sheet blanks are in the desired initial position.

The vacuum lifts **18a,18b** operate with suction cups which have variable suction pressures. Initially, the robotic lifts **18** are operated under a high vacuum pressure to initially pick up the sheet blanks **14a,16a, 14b,16b** so as to fixably retain each sheet blank as it is raised from its supply stack. As the sheet is moved in the qualifying procedure, the suction pressure is reduced. The reduced suction pressure is chosen so that the sheet blanks **14a,16a** and **14b,16b** continue to be retained by the vacuum force of the respective lift **18a,18b**, while permitting the blanks to slide laterally relative to the suction cups. The edges of the sheet blanks **14a,16a, 14b,16b** are moved against the locating pins **72** to position the sheets **14,16** on the conveyors **22** in a desired initial position. Following the initial qualifying positioning of the sheets **14a,16a, 14b,16b**, the vacuum lifts **18a,18b** are deactivated to fully release the sheets, and the locating pins

72 are retracted beneath the surface of the conveyors **22** permitting the sheets **22** to be conveyed into the enclosure **50** unhindered.

Following the initial qualifying, the pairs of sheet blanks **14a,16a, 14b,16b** are moved into the enclosure **50** for laser welding. The blanks **14a,16a** and **14b,16b** move from conveyors **22** onto conveyors **24** via the enclosure mail box or sliding door **51**. The enclosure **50** functions as a laser operations room and provides an added safety feature, whereby workers are shielded by the room from laser energy which is emitted during laser welding of the blanks.

The conveyors **24** in turn move the blanks **14a,16a, 14b,16b** into the magnetic clamping assemblies **60** which are activated magnetically to clamp the pairs of sheet blanks **14a,16a** and **14b,16b**. The pairs of blanks **14a,16a** and **14b,16b** are positioned in respective clamping units **60** so that their proximal edge portions which are to be welded together are in a substantially abutting relationship. While it is preferred that the workpiece blanks **14a,16a, 14b,16b** be positioned so that their proximal edge portions to be joined precisely abut along the entire length of the seamline **34**, the laser **36** advantageously may be used to perform welding operations where gaps of up to 0.3 mm exist between the proximal edge portions, without producing a finished weld seam which has a concave profile.

Following clamping, the laser **36** is activated to emit the composite laser beam **30** from the laser head **42**. The laser head **42** is positioned so that each of the laser beams B_1, B_2 or contiguous light sources are focused at a respective focal spot or focal area F_{A1}, F_{A2} on the surfaces of one of the pairs of blanks **14a,16a, 14b,16b**. The focus of the contiguous light sources is such that the divergence or focal area F_{A1}, F_{A2} of the beam B_1, B_2 will have an approximate average diameter of 1.2 mm. The laser beams B_1, B_2 are further oriented so that the optic centre C_1, C_2 of each beam B_1, B_2 is spaced from the other by a distance of 1.2 mm.

To weld the blanks, the coherent light source generator **40** is activated to emit the composite beam **30** from the laser head **46** while it is moved first along the seamline **34** of the blanks **14a,16b** and then along the seamline **34** of blanks **14b,16b**. The laser head **46** is moved by the movement of the laser head assembly **42** on the supports **56a,56b** and **62a,62b** by the gantry robot **54** and servo drive motor **64**; as well as through its rotation on the support **48** by drive motor **52**.

The operation of the laser **36** to weld the individual pairs of blanks **14,16** along the seamline **34** is shown best with reference to FIGS. 6 and 7 which illustrate an enlarged view of the proximal edge portion of the blanks **14,16** which is to be welded. As the laser head **46** moves along each seamline **34** in the direction of arrow **79**, the sensor **49** continuously senses the spacing between the abutting edge portions of the sheet blanks **14a,16a, 14b,16b** and provides signals to the microprocessor control. Where larger gaps between the proximal edges of the workpiece blanks **14,16** are sensed, as for example is shown in FIG. 6, the microprocessor control activates the motor **52** to rotate the laser head **46** so that the focal line L_1 of the composite beam **30** extends generally transverse to the direction of the seamline **34** and head movement, and normal to the portion of the proximal edge portions of the sheet blanks **14,16** which are being welded. Simultaneously, the microprocessor control signals the gantry robot **54** and servo drive motor **64** to slow the horizontal movement of the laser head **46** over the portion of the seamline **34**. The slower movement of the laser head **46** thereby increasing the residence time of the laser energy on the corresponding portions of the sheet blanks **14,16** to ensure a complete weld seam is formed.

If desired, simultaneously with the movement of the laser head **46**, the power output from the generator **40** may be varied to increase the composite beam **30** output power when the focal line L_1 is positioned transverse to the seamline **34**. The increased power of the beam **30** would thus compensate for the fact that the focal area of only one laser beam B_1, B_2 impinged upon each workpiece **16,14**, respectively.

The energy of each laser beam B_1, B_2 on each sheet metal blanks **16,14**, respectively, penetrates the edge portions of the sheet metal blanks **16,14**. The vapour pressure created by vaporized metal from the blanks **14,16** holds the liquid metal in suspension at the edges of the beam until the laser head **46** moves along the joint. The liquefied metal from the edge portions of each blank flows into the gap separating the blanks **14,16** and solidifies to form an autogenous, full penetration butt weld.

As the laser head **46** moves along the seamline **34**, and the sensor **49** senses that a smaller or no gaps exist between the abutting edge portions of the blanks **14,16**, as shown in FIG. **7**, the microprocessor control activates the motor **52** to rotate the laser head **46**, so that the focal line L_1 of the composite beam **30** is aligned over and in the direction of the seamline **34**, in the position shown in FIG. **7**. In this orientation, the energy of the two laser beams B_1, B_2 is focused along the seamline **34**. Less residence time is needed to achieve the composite beam **30** vaporization of the metal. As such, the microprocessor control preferably activates the gantry robot **54** and servo drive motor **64** to increase the speed at which the laser head **46** moves horizontally over the seamline **34**, speeding workpiece production, and/or decrease the power intensity of the output composite beam **30**.

It is to be appreciated that where gaps of a size between the maximum tolerable gap and no gap exist, the microprocessor control activates the motor (or another actuator such as an air cylinder) **52** to rotate the laser head **46** and move the focal line L_1 of the composite beam **30** to a position extending obliquely relative to the proximal edge portions of the blanks **14,16**.

Following the welding of the pairs blanks **14a,16a** and **14b,16b** to form the workpieces **12a,12b**, the workpieces are moved on conveyors **24**, through the exit door **53** and onto the conveyors **26**. The conveyors **26** move the completed workpieces **12a,12b** to an offload station where the offload robots **38a,38b** place the workpieces **12a,12b** in offload containers **74a,74b** (FIG. **1**).

While the preferred embodiment of the invention discloses the use of a rotating laser head **46** to reposition the focal line L_1 of the composite beam **30**, the invention is not so limited. If desired, the laser head **46** could be provided with 2, 3, 4 or more selectively activatable fibre optic cables in a bundle, each providing a contiguous energy source. In this manner, by selectively emitting two or more contiguous light sources from the fibre optic bundle, the orientation of the focal line L_1 of the composite beam **30** could be varied almost instantaneously.

Similarly, although FIGS. **4** to **7** describe a composite laser beam **30** consisting of two non-overlapping contiguous light sources, the invention is not so limited. The composite beam could, for example, consist of two, three or more laser beams provided having energy profiles with an overlapping or non-overlapping configuration.

FIGS. **8** and **9** show a further embodiment wherein like reference numerals are used to identify like components. In the embodiment shown, up to seven contiguous light sources $B_1, B_2, B_3, B_4, B_5, B_6, B_7$ may be selectively emitted from a

fibre optic bundle of seven fiber optic cables (not shown) to form the composite beam **30**. Switching between the fibre optic cables in the bundle may be performed, as for example, by the selective activation and deactivation of independent laser energy sources in the generator **40**, or by the selective positioning of lenses or other focusing apparatus.

In use, where larger gaps exist between proximal edge portions of blanks **14,16**, as shown in FIG. **8**, light sources B_1, B_3, B_4, B_5 and B_7 are simultaneously activated. This effectively provides a composite laser beam **30** which is elongated in two directions along focal lines L_1 and L_2 . As shown in FIG. **8**, the focal lines L_1, L_2 of the composite beam **30** thus extend obliquely to the direction of seamline **34** and the direction of the movement of laser head **42**. The transverse orientation of the beam energy thereby is focused further onto the edge portions of the sheet blanks **14,16**. Again, the microprocessor control may be used to signal the gantry robot **54** and servo drive motor **64** to slow the movement of the laser head **46** over the seamline **34**, and/or increase the output power of the output laser beams.

Where the proximal edge portions of the blanks **14,16** are in close abutting contact as shown in FIG. **9**, light sources B_2, B_4, B_6 are emitted as the composite beam **30**. The composite beam **30**, shown in FIG. **9**, therefore has a single focal line L_1 which is aligned with the seamline **34**. As with the composite beam shown in FIG. **7**, the laser energy is thereby focused along the seamline **34** and a shorter residence time is required for the laser beam to form the butt weld. The microprocessor control, therefore may be used to increase the speed by which the laser head **42** moves over the seamline **34** in the direction of arrow **79** in the manner previously described.

In addition, if desired, the fibre optics may be selectively activated so that one or more of the laser beams is provided either aligned with, or off centre from the focal line L_1 of the composite beam **30**. In this regard, the laser beam B_2 , shown in FIG. **8**, may be used to partially pre-vaporize edge portions of spaced sheet blanks **14,16** to be welded.

The preferred embodiment of the invention discloses the use of a YAG laser for use in butt welding operations, the invention is not so limited. If desired, other lasers may also be used, including CO₂ lasers. While the present invention is suitable for use in butt welding together sheet blanks, other welding applications are also possible and will now become apparent.

FIG. **1** shows the simultaneous production of two workpieces **12a,12b**, each having a linear seamline **34**. If desired, however, the present invention may equally be used to weld one, two or more workpieces along straight, curved or angled seamlines.

Although FIGS. **1** to **3** show a production assembly line **10** which incorporates a single laser **36** used to weld pairs of blanks **14a,16a** **14b,16b** together, the invention is not so limited. If desired, two or more lasers could be used, each with its own movable laser head for simultaneously welding a respective pair of blanks **14,16** along a seamline.

Although the preferred embodiment of the invention discloses the apparatus as including a sensor **49** for continuously sensing the spacing between the sheet blanks **14**, the invention is not so limited. In a more cost effective embodiment, the sensor **46** may be omitted. With such a configuration, the positioning of the laser head **42** may be continuously manually adjusted by an operator concurrently as welding operations are performed. Alternately, the laser head **42** may be moved to a fixed initial position which is maintained constant during welding, as for example, when blanks **14** of different thicknesses are to be joined.

11

While the preferred embodiment of the invention discloses the coherent light source generator **40** as generating separate laser beams, if desired, the energy source could be used to generate a single coherent light source which is separated into two or more laser beams in or en route to the laser head **42**.

Although the detailed description describes and illustrates preferred embodiments of the invention, the invention is not so limited. Many modifications and variations will now occur to persons skilled in the art. For a definition of the invention reference may be had to the appended claims.

We claim:

1. An apparatus for joining together proximal edge portions of two workpiece blanks along a seamline comprising, a coherent light source for emitting a composite beam to weld said blanks together along said seamline, said composite beam including a first laser beam and a second laser beam, each of said first and second laser beams being focused towards a portion of said blanks to be welded at respective focal areas having an optic centre, wherein the optic centres of said first and second laser beams are offset from each other and each define points on a focal line of said composite beam, a positioning mechanism operable to selectively alter the orientation of said focal line relative to said portion of said blanks, wherein said positioning mechanism includes at least three fiber optic coherent light source emitters selectively activatable to emit one of said first and second laser beams, a controller for controlling the positioning mechanism to selectively activate said coherent light source emitters to change the orientation of said composite beam and move said focal line to a preset orientation relative to said portion of said blanks to be welded.
2. An apparatus as claimed in claim 1 further comprising a sensor for sensing spacing between the proximal edge portions of the blanks at said portion of said blanks, the controller being operable to change the orientation of said composite beam in response to said sensed spacing.
3. An apparatus as claimed in claim 2 wherein said coherent light source emitters comprise fiber optic cables.
4. An apparatus as claimed in claim 3 wherein said first laser beam and said second laser beam are substantially non-overlapping.
5. An apparatus as claimed in claim 2 wherein said sensor comprises a sensing coherent light source emitter, and a coherent light source receptor.
6. An apparatus as claimed in claim 2 wherein said coherent light source includes a laser head which is movable along a path substantially along said seamline, and said apparatus further includes a drive operable to move said laser head along said path, and wherein the speed of movement of said laser head along said path is related to operating factors selected from the group consisting of the sensed spacing and the position of said focal line relative to said portion of said blanks to be welded.
7. An apparatus as claimed in claim 6, wherein said composite beam further includes a third laser beam, said third laser beam being focused towards said blanks at a focal area having an optic centre, wherein the optic centre of the third laser beam is intersected by the focal line.
8. An apparatus as claimed in claim 1 wherein said positioning mechanism includes at least five fiber optic cable emitters, each of said fiber optic cable emitters being selec-

12

tively operable to emit laser beams having substantially non-overlapping focal areas.

9. An apparatus as claimed in claim 1 wherein said coherent light source comprises a yttrium aluminum garnet laser.

10. An apparatus as claimed in claim 1 wherein said positioning mechanism is operable to selectively emit said beam in a position where said focal line is oriented out of alignment with said portion of said seamline, and a position wherein said focal line is substantially aligned with said portion of said seamline.

11. An apparatus as claimed in claim 10 wherein said optic centres are offset from each other by a distance between about 0.1 mm to 3 mm.

12. An apparatus as claimed in claim 10 wherein the focal area of each of said first and second laser beams at said seamline has a divergence radius selected at between about 0.2 mm and 1 mm.

13. A laser apparatus for welding together abutting edge portions of two sheet metal blanks along a seamline, the apparatus comprising:

- a laser head operable to emit laser energy to weld said blanks together along the seamline,
- a positioning mechanism operable to selectively change the orientation of said laser energy relative said seamline,
- a sensor apparatus for sensing spacing, between the abutting edge portions of the blanks, control means for controlling the positioning mechanism in response to the sensed spacing substantially continuously during welding of said sheet metal blanks, and

wherein said laser energy comprises a multiple beam of at least two offset laser beams, and wherein said laser head includes at least three coherent light source emitters, said positioning mechanism being operable to selectively activate at least some of said coherent light source emitters to change the orientation of said multiple beam relative to said seamline.

14. An apparatus as claimed in claim 13 wherein said sensor apparatus comprises a coherent light source, and a sensor for sensing light from said coherent light source.

15. A method of using an apparatus to join together adjacent portions of two workpiece blanks along a seamline, the apparatus including,

- laser for emitting a composite beam to weld said blanks together along said seamline,
 - said composite beam including a first laser beam and a second laser beam, each of said first and second laser beams being focused towards a portion of said blanks to be welded at respective focal areas having an optic center, wherein the optic centers of said first and second laser beams are offset from each other and each define one end of a focal line of said composite beam,
 - a positioning mechanism operable to alter the orientation of said composite beam to move said focal line relative to said portion of said blanks, and
 - a sensing apparatus operable to sense spacing between the abutting portions of the blanks,
- wherein said adjacent portions of said workpiece blanks are joined by the steps of:
- activating said laser to direct said composite beam towards said seamline,
 - sensing the spacing between the adjacent portions of the blanks at said portion of said blanks to be welded prior to or while moving said composite beam therealong,

13

moving said composite laser beam and said sheet blanks relative to each other to move said focal line along said portion of said blanks to be welded, changing the orientation of said focal line relative to said portion of said seamline to a preset position 5 determined by the sensed spacing between the workpiece blanks at said portion, and said positioning mechanism comprises at least three laser beam emitters selectively activatable to emit one of said first laser beam and said second laser 10 beam, wherein orientation of said focal line relative said portion of said blanks is determined by the selective activation or deactivation of said laser beam emitters.

16. A method as claimed in claim **15**, wherein during said 15 step of moving said composite beam, said composite beam and said sheet blanks are moved relative to each other at a speed determined by at least one of the position of the focal line relative to the portion of the blanks to be welded and the spacing between the workpiece blanks at said portion. 20

17. A method of using an apparatus to join together adjacent portions of two workpiece blanks along a seamline, the apparatus including,

laser for emitting a composite beam to weld said blanks 25 together along said seamline,

said composite beam including a first laser beam and a second laser beam, each of said first and second laser beams being focused towards a portion of said blanks to be welded at respective focal areas having an optic center, wherein the optic centers of said first and second 30 laser beams are offset from each other and each define one end of a focal line of said composite beam,

14

a positioning mechanism operable to alter the orientation of said composite beam to move said focal line relative to said portion of said blanks, and

a sensing apparatus operable to sense spacing between the abutting portions of the blanks,

wherein said adjacent portions of said workpiece blanks are joined by the steps of:

activating said laser to direct said composite beam towards said seamline,

sensing the spacing between the adjacent portions of the blanks at said portion of said blanks to be welded prior to or while moving said composite beam therealong,

moving said composite laser beam and said sheet blanks relative to each other to move said focal line along said portion of said blanks to be welded,

changing the orientation of said focal line relative to said portion of said seamline to a preset position determined by the sensed spacing between the workpiece blanks at said portion, and wherein said positioning mechanism comprises a bundle of at least three fiber optic cable emitters selectively activatable to emit one of said first laser beam and said second laser beam, wherein orientation of said focal line relative said portion of said blanks is determined by the selective activation or deactivation of said fiber optic cable emitters.

18. The method as claimed in claim **17**, wherein said laser comprises a yttrium aluminum garnet laser.

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